

Labour Market Advisory Council

Friday, 18th December 2020

10.00 (Online meeting)

In Attendance:

Council Members: John Martin (Chair), Frank Gleeson, Terry Corcoran, Ade Stack, Bríd O'Brien, Ger Gibbons, Philip O'Connell, Sinead McSweeney.

Apologies received: Angela Smith, Kara McGann.

Ex-Officio Members: Geraldine Hurley, Jenny Connors, Andrew Brownlee, David Hegarty.

Apologies received: Dermot Coates.

D/SP Officials: Louise Kavanagh (LMAC Secretary), Siobhán Lawlor, Niall Egan, Chris Kane, Niall O'Muircheartaigh, Hugh Cronin, Ailbhe Brioscú, Jeff Dwan O'Reilly.

i. Adoption of the Agenda and Minutes of the Last Meeting

The Chair opened the meeting by welcoming all members and offering apologies and well wishes on behalf of Minister Humphreys who was unable to attend due to a Cabinet commitment. Council members adopted today's agenda and approved the minutes of the last meeting (22nd October). These documents will be published on the LMAC webpage.

ii. Discussion on the Institute for Employment Studies Report on the Irish Public Employment Service.

Niall Egan and Chris Kane (D/SP) presented an overview of the objectives of the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) report on the Irish Public Employment Service (PES) which aims to: create a coherent customer journey through the PES network; to ensure the PES network has the capacity to quickly respond to changing labour market trends; and to regularise the model of contracted PES provision in line with public procurement policy.

A comprehensive roundtable discussion on the IES report took place following the presentation. Council members were asked to focus their comments on the main IES recommendations under three strands: Intreo recommendations; the proposed contracted employment services model (National, Sub-National and Disability); and the payments-by-results element in all strands with a procurement on a fixed-price basis.

Council members welcomed the opportunity to discuss the IES report and its findings.

Some of the key points raised by Members were as follows:

- The Council welcomed the IES' recommendations relating to the enhanced use of digital technologies, particularly in the context of COVID-19, but noted the need for balance to be struck between digital and face-to-face service provision.
- Members welcomed the recommendation on enhanced focus on employment quality and earnings outcomes. While Members agreed that there is need for enhanced monitoring and evaluation across all strands of the PES, Members also expressed the need to focus on other outcomes, such as remedying basic skills gaps and progression to training and education, which may better assist an individual's journey back to employment in the longer-term.
- Members highlighted the need for improved branding and communications to achieve greater public awareness of Intreo services.
- Members welcomed the recommendation for a better use of a triaging approach by Intreo, along with enhanced application of the PEX profiling assessment which is currently being revised and updated.
- Members noted the potential for increased involvement of stakeholders in improving communication and channels of communication, in particular with employers.
- Concern was expressed in relation to IES recommendations on performance targets. Members noted that careful consideration needs to be given to framing them in such a way that case-officers and other frontline staff will not become less inclined to support individuals in receipt of particular payments.
- In relation to the IES recommendations regarding the procurement of contracted services, Members outlined the need to balance quality requirements with results, with appropriate mechanisms needed to deal with poor performance by service providers.
- On the recommendations relating to a payment-by-results model, some Members believed this should be introduced across the entire PES contracted service provision. However, others raised concerns that the adoption of this model might result in the loss of the service's "public welfare ethos", which could have knock-on effects for trust in the PES network.
- The need for full engagement with all stakeholders on the future of all programmes was noted by some Members.

It was agreed that, following this discussion, the Chair and the Secretariat would prepare a draft report summarising the Council's views on the IES report and recommendations which would be circulated to all members for their review and comments before finalisation and onward transmission to Minister Humphreys.

iii. Work Placement and Experience Programme (WPEP)

Geraldine Hurley and Siobhán Lawlor (D/SP) provided a detailed summary of the new Work Placement and Experience Programme which is being developed under the July Jobs Stimulus package to provide work experience for jobseekers that have been unemployed for more than six months (including a period of time spent in receipt of a PUP payment), with education, training, guidance and mentoring constituting core elements of the new Programme. D/SP are working closely with SOLAS and recruitment organisations to identify training needs for participants and appropriate solutions.

This initiative builds on international research and earlier advice from the Council that quality work placements have the capacity to keep unemployed people close to the labour market and provide them with quality work experience to increase their long-term employability. While an early 2021 launch is envisaged for the new programme, the timing of the launch and availability of the scheme will be wholly dependent on the public health restrictions in place at the time.

Council members welcomed the Department's proposal, with feedback on the scheme including the following:

- An appropriate rate of payment will be key to the success of the scheme and how the scheme will be received amongst potential participants, host organisations and more critically for the public reputation of the new scheme.
- Members noted the need to ensure quality of both the work experience and training provided through the programme; the Irish and international evaluation evidence show clearly that both have significant impacts on programme outcomes for participants.
- There is a need to build on lessons learnt, both in terms of what worked and what did not work, from previous work placement and internship schemes.
- Members enquired as to whether the new Programme will replace the Youth Employment Support Scheme (YESS) or will both run in parallel. DSP noted that YESS will be incorporated into the WPEP.
- There will be a need to target placements in specific sectors of the economy with future potential for growth and employment opportunities.

iv. AOB and Date of Next Meeting

Work is progressing to establish the evaluation and employer engagement sub-groups of the Council. Philip O'Connell and Frank Gleeson have agreed to chair the respective groups, with membership and work programmes currently being finalised. The Chair noted a proposal by ICTU to nominate a representative for the employer engagement sub-group and will liaise with them bilaterally on this.

Philip O'Connell suggested that the Council's membership be extended to include a representative of young people.

A date for the next meeting, expected to take place during Q1 2021, will be circulated in due course.

Action Points:

- Council observations on the IES Report to be prepared by the Chair and Secretariat and agreed by the Council for submission to Minister Humphreys.
- Any written observations received on the new Work Placement Experience Programme (by early January) to be collated by the Secretariat for review by the relevant D/SP officials.
- Chair to finalise the composition of the employer engagement and evaluation sub-groups with relevant members before arranging for formal invitations to be issued.